

Firefighters Moving Out Of County

Montgomery Forum To Address Housing

By TIM CRAIG

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Montgomery's affordable housing crunch has reached yet another milestone as a new report shows that fewer than a quarter of the county's firefighters live where they work, with the largest number living in Frederick County.

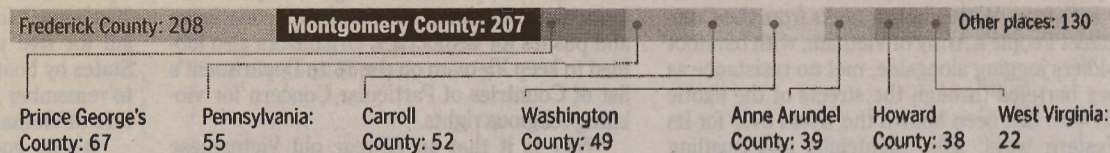
The report is another indicator that the middle class is bypassing Montgomery County and other close-in suburbs in search of affordable housing. Last month, county planners projected that the median price of a new single-family detached home in Montgomery will exceed \$1 million in about three years.

An array of state, local and federal elected officials will assemble in North Bethesda tomorrow for a summit on ways to ease the housing crunch.

"When I look at the long-term future of the county, I say transportation is the biggest challenge, but affordable housing is probably a

Where Montgomery's Firefighters Live

Home addresses of 867 active Montgomery County firefighters show that most live elsewhere.



SOURCE: Affordable Housing Conference, Montgomery County Career Fire Fighters Association

THE WASHINGTON POST

Firefighters Squeezed Out in Montgomery

HOUSING, From C1

close second," said County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D), who plans to speak at the Affordable Housing Conference at the Bethesda North Marriott Conference Center.

In preparation for the conference, the organizers teamed with the Montgomery County Career Fire Fighters Association to examine where the county's 900 career firefighters reside.

A similar study two years ago found that 31 percent of firefighters lived in Montgomery. The number dropped to 24 percent this year.

Now, of the 867 firefighters covered by the study, 207 live in Montgomery, while 208 call Frederick County home. Other areas where at least 20 Montgomery firefighters reside are West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Prince George's, Carroll, Washington, Anne Arundel, Howard and Baltimore counties.

The numbers are even worse than they appear, county officials said.

"If you look at the 24 percent who live in the county, I think you will find a lot of them live with their parents," Duncan said.

John J. Sparks, president of the firefighters association, said basic math is causing most of his members to live as much as a two-hour drive from their fire stations. He conceded that firefighters, who typically work 24- or 48-hour shifts, don't have to endure a daily commute. But he said the county's security suffers if its emergency workers live too far away to get to work quickly during a catastrophic event.

"They really can't afford to live in the county they work in," said Sparks, who lives in Carroll County. "The prices are outrageous and they continue to go through the roof."

An entry-level firefighter makes

about \$37,000 a year. Mid-career firefighters are paid a median salary of \$52,200, according to documents prepared for the County Council.

The county's median household income is \$84,000. A study by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission released last month found that families earning Montgomery's median income have shrinking housing options.

Within a few years, the researchers predicted, the median annual household income will not be enough to support the purchase of at least half the previously occupied townhouses on the market, which last year had a median sales price of \$274,000.

The median price of a new townhouse was \$415,000 last year, while the median price for a previously occupied single-family home was \$450,000.

New single-family houses had a median sales price of \$660,000 last year, and researchers expect them to top \$1 million about 2008 if real estate trends continue.

"It's just a shortage of housing," said Norman Dreyfuss, a real estate developer and co-chairman of tomorrow's summit.

Besides featuring speeches from Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes (D-Md.) and Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), the conference will explore ways to increase the county's housing supply, which could lead to denser neighborhoods and taller buildings.

The discussions are coming too late for Marc Worton, a Montgomery firefighter who has a base salary of \$64,000.

When he and his wife had their third child two years ago, the family outgrew its Germantown townhouse, so he began looking for a single-family home.

"We didn't have the room and looked around Montgomery and obviously couldn't afford to live in the house we needed for a family of

five," said Worton, 34, who purchased a four-bedroom house near Hagerstown, Md., for \$179,000.

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